1 Setting Goals at Home

Kris was a school psychologist at a renowned public school program for children with autism. He was very sensitive to the stress levels of parents and felt confident that if he could reduce stress, then the children were more likely to show the skills they had acquired at school in all settings. Kris was comfortable with the goals that teachers and specialists typically recommended for the very young, incoming students—orienting to the teachers and their instructions, improving their communication skills, and reducing the inappropriate behaviors they often had when they entered the school program.

Kris typically interviewed parents about the impact their child had on their home life. While interviewing Amy and Mark Baskel about their typical grocery shopping patterns, he was surprised to learn of a style he had never dreamt of. They calmly told him that one of them would usually shop at one o'clock in the morning. Kris asked if this had anything to do with special sales at that hour. The parents said that they picked that hour because one of them could shop while the other stayed home, most confident that their three-year old son, Billy, would be asleep! Kris then asked if they had considered taking their son to the grocery store with them. They looked at each other, and then simply laughed. A few weeks later, Kris asked the classroom staff to take Billy to the supermarket. Upon their return, they told Kris about Billy's loud tantrums throughout their trip to the store and exclaimed that they now understood why the Baskels had laughed—and that they now knew a critical skill for Billy to learn.

How Do We Choose What to Focus On?

How do we help parents determine what's important to teach to their children at home and in their neighborhood? As we can see from the above example, teaching Billy to accompany his parents to the supermarket would permit them to shop at a more normal hour, and also greatly reduce their stress levels. So, one important way to determine what we should teach is to identify what typical family patterns are most disrupted and thus lead to substantial stress for all members of the family.

The other major way to pinpoint what we should teach is to determine what skills are most important for a child to learn so he can become less dependent on adults. When children are very young, parents and other caregivers expect to do many things and provide great support for these family members. But as children grow, we increasingly expect them to participate more fully in many routines at home and in the neighborhood. If this change does not occur, parents' levels of involvement remain very high. So, you will want to consider the various ways that your child's lack of skills leads to additional stress relative to what you would expect of other children at the same age. For example, if your teenage son cannot help in any of the laundry routine, then you will be spending many extra hours every week doing his laundry, just as you did when he was two years old.

On the other hand, you may experience stress because of the disruptive behavior your child displays either at home or in neighborhood settings. In our example above, while Billy's parents would not expect a great deal of independence from any three-year-old in a supermarket, they were concerned with the tantrums they had to

deal with when they took their son shopping with them. As we shall discuss in Chapter 7 on "Dealing with Difficult Behaviors," sometimes a problematic behavior is related to your child's lack of skill in some area, but other times your child may well have a skill but not use it in certain situations.

Your first step, therefore, in figuring out how to improve your family life is to consider critical areas in which your child either has:

a. limited skills, or
b. significant problem behaviors that you feel cause ongoing stress within your family.

For issues that involve skills related to communication, please refer to Chapter 3 for more details about functional communication goals.

We've provided the form below (Table 1-1) for you to fill in with other members of your family. We suggest you limit your answer to three or four items in each category so that you will be able to create a workable list of goals. Right now, we are only concerned with finding areas that are causing stress within the family. Later, we will describe how you may best work on teaching certain skills (Chapter 5) and handle behavior management problems (Chapter 7).

Table 1-1 | Skill Deficits and Problem Behaviors

Location	Skill Deficit	Problem Behavior
At home	Example: *Cannot tie shoes* 1. 2. 3.	Example: *Screams for help* 1. 2. 3.
Neighborhood	Example: *Cannot cross streets* 1. 2. 3.	Example: *Opens other people's mailboxes* 1. 2. 3.
Community Settings	Example: *Cannot buy snacks independently* 1. 2. 3.	Example: *Runs through the mall* 1. 2. 3.

Other Methods for Determining What to Teach

Focusing on the most stressful situations may seem like a natural way to prioritize what to teach at home. However, your child may not have many problem behaviors or you may feel that his skill deficits interfere with home life more than the presence of problem behaviors. So, in addition to reviewing critical behaviors, you should also look more broadly at important skills to teach. There are two other systematic approaches that will help you discover what you should teach at home. One system relates to the time of day when problems occur, while the other focuses on the area of the house (or the location in the community) where your child experiences difficulties.

The Time-Based Approach

When we follow the time-based approach to identifying skills to teach, we ask parents to describe common sequences of events in the course of the day and then cluster activities by when they occur. For example, what are the routines for school-day mornings? Often, parents will describe a sequence similar to that shown in Table 1-2—

Table 1-2 | Sample Schedule

7:00 AM	Wake Billy
7:03	Take Billy to the bathroom and use toilet
7:07	Go back to bedroom and help Billy take off his pajamas
7:11	Help Billy put on his school clothes and sneakers
7:20	Go to the kitchen and turn on TV with favorite video running
7:23	Eat cereal (without milk!), drink juice, eat 5 grapes while watching TV
7:40	Go to bathroom, wash hands and face, brush teeth
7:50	Go to living room and watch TV (cartoons)
8:05	Get coat and backpack
8:10	Leave house and get on bus

starting with when they wake up their child to the time when he gets on the school bus.

We would continue to ask for a description of other time-chunks, such as:

1. The block of time in the afternoon after the child comes home from school;
2. Times associated with preparing, eating, and cleaning up after dinner;
3. Early evening recreational activities;
4. Preparing for and taking a bath;
5. Getting ready for and going to bed.

Of course, on weekends and holidays, families typically identify other significant blocks of time (see Table 1-3 for examples of common weekend family-based activities). When you make this type of timetable, be certain to indicate whether it relates to everyday or special routines.

Notice that these examples focus on routines at home. It will be helpful to start with a full description of your life at home, but you will eventually want to write down routines for community activities and events. It is possible that your family has a routine or frequent commu-

Table 1-3 | Detailed Schedule for Saturday Mornings

(Make time adjustments for Billy's actual wake-up time.)

7:00 AM	Wake Billy
7:03	Take Billy to the bathroom and use toilet
7:07	Put in Billy's favorite videotape or DVD while he plays in his room in his pajamas
7:45	Help Billy put on his play clothes and sneakers
8:00	Go to the kitchen and turn on TV in kitchen with favorite video running
8:10	Eat cereal (without milk!), drink juice, eat 5 grapes
8:30	Take Billy to bathroom, wash hands and face, brush teeth
8:45	Go to living room and watch TV (cartoons)
9:30	Let Billy wake up Dad and jump on his bed!
9:40	Get Billy to help Mom bring laundry to basement

nity outing on many school nights. These could include visits by tutors or other specialists (e.g., the piano teacher), trips to a dance class, or Scout meetings. For such events, be sure to note the people your child interacts with as well as the activities in which he is expected to participate.

The Area-Based Approach

Another way to identify important skills to teach is to review all areas in and around your home. When we follow the area-based approach, we talk to parents about common activities and routines in particular areas of the house. In addition to asking questions about common expectations for the child, we would ask questions about particular areas of the house that currently cause significant stress. Sometimes these areas are places in the home in which some family members like or need to engage in particular activities that your child does not participate in. For example, if you need to spend time in the kitchen preparing dinner, what will your three-year-old do at the same time?

Table 1-4 includes a list of common areas in a home or apartment and activities that families often do within those areas. Using the blank form provided on page 148, please list the typical activities that members of your family engage in. You may want to make a special note if you expect your child to do something other than what other people are doing. For example, you may be cutting vegetables for dinner but you'd like your child to use a coloring book while sitting at the kitchen table.

Consider what you expect of your child while in the kitchen, the living room, his own bedroom, the basement work-area, and so on. Be sure to consider what you expect your child to do while you are watching TV. Parents may hope that their child will also watch TV, but ask yourself if you should reasonably expect your child to watch the same shows as you do. That is, if Mom likes to watch the 6 o'clock local news, what will she expect her son to do in the living room at that time? Are there toys that he can play with, or are there other recreational materials on hand? At times, we all have vague expectations for our children—"I'd just like him to leave me alone for 15 minutes and not to get into trouble!" However, most young children with autism and related disabilities have significant limitations in how well they can occupy themselves in a manner that we would find acceptable.

Table 1-4 | Areas of the Home and Common Activities

Area of home/ apartment	Common activities
Kitchen	Preparing food, setting table, eating, cleaning up after a meal, washing dishes, putting dishes away, putting groceries away, sweeping the floor, getting food items from the refrigerator or cupboards, talking on the phone, listening to the radio, watering plants, feeding pets
Living room	Reading books or magazines, sitting and talking to other adults, vacuuming
Dining room	Setting the table, eating meals, cleaning up, dusting or waxing furniture, cleaning floors
Bedroom	Making bed, selecting clothing, sorting clothing, vacuum room, dusting room, reading books, listening to music, feeding fish, watering plant
Bathroom	Filling bathtub, starting shower, bathing, using toilet, brushing teeth, applying deodorant, shaving, cleaning mirror, washing sink and bathtub, cleaning toilet
Rec/TV room	Watching TV, playing DVD, playing music, playing card/board games, dusting and vacuuming, sorting and putting away books, videos, DVDs and CDs
Laundry area	Sorting laundry, loading and running washing machine and dryer, folding laundry, ironing
Garage	Sorting tools, sorting outdoor toys, putting toys away, cleaning car, working on building projects

Kitchen Activities

Let's think about activities in the kitchen. Parents prepare, serve, eat, and clean up meals. Another common adult activity in the kitchen is talking on the telephone. We want to think about how a child can help us with activities as well as consider what the child can do while we are engaged in some important activity and do not want to be interrupted.

What can we expect a five-year-old to do in the kitchen? Many people would simply wait for the child to get older—quite frankly, we don't really expect much of typically developing five-year-olds in helping prepare for dinner! However, we know that children with significant learning needs require more time to learn many different skills. So, if we want the child to be able to help us like a typically developing ten-year-old when he is ten, then we must start far earlier than age ten to teach him to help out. We encourage very young children to start participating in household routines in order to provide ample opportunities for them to learn the required skills.

To help set the table, we can reasonably expect a five-year-old to put out the napkins—at first, maybe simply on the plates; over time, next to the plates; still later, folded and under the fork. Instead of asking the child to handle glassware, we could have him put out small paper cups. In teaching him to place the silverware on the table, we could start with the spoons and use plastic knives if we think that is safer.

Bedroom Activities

Using this area-based approach, let's review what we can expect a child to do in his own bedroom. Usually, we expect children to get undressed and dressed, put away and retrieve clothes, make the bed, play with toys and clean up afterwards, possibly use a computer or audio/video equipment, and go to bed. Here, too, we believe that children with autism should be encouraged to participate in these routines as early as possible, using age appropriate goals.

In general, we advise that you anticipate what you are likely to expect of your child when he is three, five, or even ten years older. Be as specific as you can with particular skills. (See Chapter 5 for examples of how to write a task-analysis for complex skills.) Next, try to determine how much of that skill set your child can currently do. Can he do any of the steps by himself? What type of help does he now need for these skills? Next, think of how you can simplify the task so that it is more age appropriate for your child. For example, you may want to involve fewer steps now than he'll need in three years. You may want to modify the materials involved so that they are more durable, lightweight, or safer to handle, or make similar alterations. It is important to consider the types of communications issues that can arise within each activity as well, and we will take a more detailed look at some of these goals within Chapter 3.

For example, while we may not expect a five-year-old to pick out his clothes and put each item on independently, we would want to teach him to participate as fully as possible in getting and putting on his clothes. Choosing clothes can involve having him follow your instructions regarding what item to wear (e.g., "Pick up your pants" vs. "Pick up your shoes"); details about the item (e.g., "Take the blue shirt" vs. "Take the red shirt"); where to find the clothes (e.g., "Open your dresser" vs. "Open the closet"); and so on.

If your child has difficulties understanding language, you can arrange to teach him the same skills without giving verbal instructions like those we just described. For example, you can set out on his bed his father's biggest sweatshirt, a shirt from a Barbie doll, and his own shirt. There is no need to say, "Take your shirt." You merely need to encourage him with gestures to take a shirt. If he chooses the wrong shirt, simply encourage him to put it on. When that fails, immediately encourage him to pick up his own shirt. It is not necessary to have him immediately take his shirt off and try to choose again. Instead, the next time he needs to choose—most likely the next morning—repeat the choice, and if he chooses correctly, praise him for his cleverness while helping him put on his shirt. At other times, you can offer him choices between huge sneakers, baby doll shoes, and his own sneakers or other similar comparisons.

Prioritizing Goal Setting

Once you have identified a number of skills and behavior problems that you want to address, you will need to prioritize your goals. Clearly, you will not be able to devote concentrated time and effort to everything. You could pick the most difficult problem behaviors to start, but it is likely that these are behaviors that have a long history and may involve many steps to change. We advise focusing first on the skills that would have the most dramatic effect upon your family life if your child acquired them. Teaching your child skills also will involve the use of powerful reinforcers and this will help keep a positive spotlight within your family. (See Chapter 2.) You may want to give added weight to skills that will affect several family members, thus assuring that everyone in the family will have a chance to help promote new skills at home. For example, teaching your child to play quietly with

toys or other materials will benefit everyone in your home because then your child can always have something fun to do when others need to do something that does not directly involve him.

How Can We Write Reasonable Goals?

Once you have selected some goals, you will want to write them down so that they are clear to everyone else at home. Try to keep the descriptions relatively simple and straightforward, but at the same time, descriptive of an action. For example, your first impulse may be to write, "Joey will be happy playing" but there will be many different meanings of "happy" within your home. Instead, you could write, "Joey will play with his cars for 10 minutes without help." This type of description is something that everyone can readily agree upon and directly measure. In fact, your aim is to write a description of the goal in such a way that everyone can count or measure the action in the same way.

Here are pairs of potential goals within your home. Please look at each pair and see if you can tell which ones lead to direct measurement and which ones are too vague or indirect:

a. Zach will dress himself quickly.
b. Zach will put on his underwear, socks, pants, shirt, shoes, and belt within 10 minutes of being told to get dressed in the morning.

a. Maria will hit with her fist no more than 2 times per week.
b. Maria will be less aggressive.

a. Phillip will wash his clothes.
b. Phillip will take his laundry basket to the basement, put his clothes in the washing machine, add soap, set the dial correctly, and start the machine within 10 minutes after seeing "laundry time" on his written schedule.

As you can readily see, in each pair, one description is too vague to lead to a direct way to measure or count the action, while the other one is narrow enough to permit two (or more) people to easily agree if the action occurred. Yes, it takes a bit more time to write goals in this

detailed fashion, but you will end up avoiding many arguments as to whether or not something important happened.

How Many Lessons at Once?

We think it is a good idea for parents to remember to focus on only one lesson at a time. For example, your goal might be to teach your child to pick out his clothes by listening to your instructions. If so, after he picks his clothes, you should help him quickly put them on rather than starting another lesson on how to put on a shirt. When you want to teach him how to put on a shirt, simply give him the shirt you want him to wear rather than adding another layer (such as choosing the shirt) to the lesson. As your child's skills improve, you can combine tasks, such as having him listen to your instructions as well as putting it on by himself.

We do not mean that children cannot do more than one thing at a time. For example, we can encourage a child to talk about what he is putting on while getting dressed, but it will be most effective to decide ahead of time whether you are focusing your attention on what he is saying or how he is getting dressed. If you are trying to give feedback on both skills, you are likely to confuse your child.

Should We All Do the Same Thing at the Same Time?

Many families enjoy spending time together while in the family room or living room; often, this time is centered around the TV. While some children with autism and related disabilities like to watch particular cartoons or favorite videotapes, they may want to watch the same show too often for everyone else in the family to enjoy. What can they do while their family is watching other shows or videos? Although you may hope that your child will enjoy what you watch, achieving that goal in the near future is probably unlikely. Therefore, you should plan for your child to do something else when other family members are watching a TV program he does not enjoy. If your child needs to learn a new skill in order to do something else, then this is yet another thing to add to your list of skills to teach your child.

One family knew that their daughter enjoyed the sound and music on her favorite movie video, so they bought the CD of the music from the movie and taught her to listen with headphones. They then taught her to sit in the family room listening to her music while everyone else watched TV. At first, this worked for only 5 minutes at a stretch, but over time, they were able to increase that time to about 30 minutes. Another family noticed that their son liked to build complex designs with his Lego® set. They reserved his Lego playtime for when they wanted to watch TV. Then, they would put the blocks out on a table in the room so that they could generally watch what he was doing without having to pay attention to him moment by moment.

To find something your child can do while the family is otherwise occupied, observe what he likes to do independently or start to teach him some quiet but independent activities. Remember, teaching a child to engage in appropriate activities independently for significant periods of time will be a gradual process, requiring great patience from your family. It may take a full year to progress from 2 to 3 minutes of quiet time to 20 to 30 minutes—and your end goal should be tempered by the age of your child. Rarely do 4-year-olds play alone and constructively for 30 minutes or more.

In addition to thinking about how to occupy your child when everyone is gathered in the living room or family room, consider the other areas of your home where you spend significant amounts of time or that you use on a consistent and frequent basis. For example, you may not spend a great deal of time in the laundry area, but doing the wash is something that occurs over and over. Here, too, you can choose between teaching your child to participate with you in some manner or you may want to teach him something to do when you need to spend time here.

How Is a Home Different from a School?

If your child receives special education, a team has worked with you to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP). In general, these plans are constructed after a specialist has reviewed the skill deficits and strengths your child displayed on some standardized assessment(s). From this list, team members most likely selected certain areas that needed to be addressed and noted them in general terms. For example, a teacher may have suggested that your child needs

to work on "attending skills" and on "knowing colors and shapes"; a speech/language pathologist may have proposed goals related to learning receptive and expressive communication skills; another specialist may have suggested that your child needs to improve his sense of balance. From these general descriptions of skills your child needs to learn came more specific descriptions of lesson plans detailing how the staff would teach specific skills. But how can parents best address their child's skill deficits in the home?

Rather than trying to convert your home into a school, we suggest that you examine your home for opportunities to work on the same set of skills that staff are trying to address at school. The routines you've already identified earlier in this chapter will become a great source of teaching opportunities. Below are some examples of how you can look at common routines to find teachable opportunities throughout your home and across the day.

By examining the routines in the laundry area you can find opportunities to work on many of the basic skills your child is taught at school. For example, you can teach your child to sort or match clothes by: a) type (shirt vs. pants), b) size (large, medium, small), c) color tone (lights vs. darks), d) specific colors (red vs. blue), e) specific people (the child's vs. Dad's or Mom's items), or even f) clean versus dirty. When sorting, you begin with a large pile of clothes (possibly in a laundry basket) and teach your child to go through the items, placing the t-shirts in the washing machine but the socks and pants into another basket. When matching, you can place some light clothes in one basket and some dark items in another and guide your child to place the remaining items in the proper baskets. You can add various communication goals within these activities (e.g., instruction following, naming items or attributes, asking for items, etc.), but that is not mandatory. In fact, learning the steps of the routine should be taught before working on these communication goals. (See Chapter 3 for guidance on communication goals.)

It may be difficult for young children to take wet clothes out of the washing machine and put them into the dryer but you can teach an intermediate step, such as having them help place some small items from a basket into the dryer. After the clothes are dry, you can again work on sorting or matching, or you can work on learning how to handle the clean clothes—folding them, putting them into baskets, taking them to the bedroom, and putting them neatly into dressers. You can adjust

the degree of assistance at each step (we will describe specific teaching strategies in Chapter 6) according to your child's current skill level. For example, you may complete some of the folding while leaving the last step for your child to complete. Or, you can put two socks next to each other and simply have your child place one atop the other; later, you can add the goal of having your child find the matching sock that you pull out of the pile.

Look at Table 1-5 to compare lessons that may be taught at school but also could be taught at home. As you can see, some of the materials you might use for teaching at home are the same as materials used at school, and some are different.

Table 1-5 | Comparing Lessons at School and Home

School Lesson	Home Activity	Home Materials
Expressive Labeling	Name common areas, items, activities	Pets, toys, clothes, cutlery, TV, bed, table, foods
Receptive Identification	Get or point to common items; put object with common items	Pets, toys, clothes, cutlery, TV, bed, table, foods
Direction Following	"put ____ on ____" "Give it to ____"	Hug a toy or pet; shake hands or kiss people; push or put away a toy car; scribble with or pick up a crayon
Sorting	Separating items into groups	Cans on one shelf/bottles on another; dolls in one box/toy cars in another; socks in one drawer/ shirts in another; pots in one cabinet/paper bags in another
Matching to Sample	Putting similar items together	Laundry: put clothes in piles by family member, size, color, type, etc. Kitchen: put like utensils, dishes, cups, pots, etc. together

Review

The first element of the Pyramid Approach involves issues related to the functional activities we want our children to develop over time. Functional activities include skills that will serve the individual throughout his lifetime and lead to greater independence in different settings. In order to help your child develop skills that will last a lifetime both in and around a home, you will need to create lessons that are practical and that function in these settings.

To determine what is important to teach, consider your child's skill deficits as well as the problematic behaviors that lead to stress within the family. Review your routines both by the time of day and the location within your home where activities occur. Be prepared to spend several years to help your child acquire skills that will lead to greater independence. In part, this goal can be accomplished by considering how your child can participate in many activities and routines throughout the day and within all areas of your home. We will continue moving through the elements of the Pyramid Approach in the following chapters. We next focus our attention on how to motivate your child to learn these new skills before we address how to teach them step-by-step.